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## **DANCING TOGETHER: A CONVERSATION ABOUT YOUTH AND ADULT RELATIONAL AUTHORITY IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATION**

**Warren Linds, Ali Sammel, and Linda Goulet**

**Abstract:** Some ideas about authority in educational settings assume that authority is something that teachers possess and students don't. Like others, the authors of this article conceive authority as shared. Shared authority occurs when the teacher recognizes students' history and uses her or his authority to bring students' knowledge, and thus their authority of knowing, to the learning. In this way, authority emerges in dialogical relationships between teachers and students. As three university educators in different contexts, we teach adults who will work with youth. Through dialogue and reflection of our attempts to implement the philosophies and practices that promote more meaningful interactions between adults and youth, we have come to recognize that each of us use authority differently at different times depending on the context. So we now use the term situational authority to describe how we seek to share authority. We invite those who work with youth to join us in these conversations and reflections as we investigate the sharing of authority within youth-adult interactions. We believe situational authority can transform power relations between adults and youth, while encouraging the emergence of new emancipatory relationships within, and amongst, youth. Together we explore ways in which situational authority invites, and supports, emancipatory practice.

**Keywords:** formal, informal and non-formal education, shared and relational authority, situational authority, emancipatory adult-youth relationships, transformational education, emancipatory teaching

**Warren Linds, Ph.D.** (the corresponding author) is an Associate Professor with the Department of Applied Human Sciences at Concordia University, 1455 De Maisonneuve Blvd. W., Montreal, Quebec, H3G 1M8. E-mail: [w.linds@sympatico.ca](mailto:w.linds@sympatico.ca)

**Alison Sammel, Ph.D.** is a Lecturer and Smithsonian Fellow at the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia.  
E-mail: [a.sammel@griffith.edu.au](mailto:a.sammel@griffith.edu.au)

**Linda M Goulet, Ph.D.** is a Professor in the Department of Indigenous Education at the Northern Campus of First Nations University of Canada.  
E-mail: [lgoulet@firstnationsuniversity.ca](mailto:lgoulet@firstnationsuniversity.ca)

*[L]iving the life of a dancer requires that one attends to motion, synergy, and the internal and variant rhythms of consciousness housed in one's own body as well as the bodies of those with whom one lives/dances. (Salvio, 1997, p. 248)*

In a variant rhythm of questions and answers, the authors of this article explore a larger constant: the often invisible and unheard rhythm of the dance of power. This rhythm glides and flows within teaching practices. This dance of power occurs between adult and youth, and youth and their peers. Bearing witness to the unfolding subtle or overt dance of power that occurs in teaching spaces requires both the youth and adult to not only recognize the dance, and themselves as dancers, but also to understand how it has historically been orchestrated and how it can be reimagined.

For the authors of this article, this reimagining is embodied in emancipatory practices. Such practices involve enhancing critical and creative thinking and reflective understanding, as well as promoting individual and collective action. Teaching and learning are viewed reflexively, and come together through dialogue and action to address and transform power relations between adults, youth, educational settings, and society (Arnold, Burke, James, Martin, & Thomas, 1991). By understanding what power is and can be in our educational settings, and by envisioning how it can be shared, the authors have come to understand that for emancipatory practice to become a reality, both teachers and students need to understand and negotiate power relationships by negotiating authority. We believe it is important to discuss how we each make sense, both theoretically and practically, of the complex and elusive concepts of power, authority, and emancipatory practice. Therefore, we begin our joint choreography by reflecting on traditional understandings of the term *authority*. With this as a foundation, we each begin the discussion around the complexity of this term in relation to how it evolves in and through our own educational practices.

### **Tripping the Light Fantastic with Authority**

Some ideas about authority in the educational system assume that authority is something that teachers and students possess and use (e.g., Giroux, 1986; Hirsch, 1999; Shor, 1992). Bingham (2008) explains that traditionally, authority is seen to reside with the knower: the knower has authority. The knower then communicates this knowledge to those who do not have the authority of knowing. If this is done with clarity and effectiveness, then the authority of knowing can be passed along to rational people using a language that is assumed to be common to all. This form of authority is key in educational institutions where traditions and time have legitimated beliefs and practices normalizing imbalances of power between teacher and student. This imbalance dictates who can be considered expert and who can be granted authority. Others (e.g., Applebaum, 1999; Bingham, 2008; Burbules, 1995; Freire, 1970) conceive of authority as emerging in dialogical relationships between teachers and students much like the dance described in the above quotation. This article will ask what this latter concept of relational authority means in theory and practice to those who teach students who will go on to work with youth. It does this by exploring the beliefs and practices of three university teachers. Warren will explore the dynamic nature of authority that shifts in the interplay between content, process, and

the power relationships that need be considered when adults and youth work together in group settings. Linda explores the paradox of how teachers use their authority to create spaces where students can express themselves and develop their authority. Ali invites the reader to reflect on her journey investigating how a *flipped classroom* (where knowledge production is shared) can be achieved through sharing authority. Through reflection on our educational experiences and in dialogue with each other, we ask the reader to join us in exploring the concept of authority and how it can evolve into a sharing of authority that promotes emancipatory practices.

**Warren Linds:** I teach university students in an undergraduate human relations program. These students are already, or will be, working in positions of authority with youth. Authority, though, is a slippery concept. Bingham (2008) has written about authority as being relational, in that in his experience lecturing in a university situation, authority is dynamic and constantly shifting through dialogue and questioning between teacher and student. He asks us to consider how authority operates and how its careful use might lead to human agency, which is an important consideration when thinking about authority in professional relationships. For Heron (1999), “genuine authority proceeds from those who are flourishing from their own inner resources and can thereby enable other people to flower in the same way” (p. 20). He describes three kinds of authority:

1. Tutelary: the use of content and processes to enable understanding of something.
2. Political: the use of power in decision-making processes by the facilitator alone, in collaboration with a group, or by the group with the facilitator being there to guide.
3. Charismatic: how the leader influences learners and the learning process. The leader or facilitator is present through expressive use of the voice and words, as well as behaviour, and is seen to take risks in their interactions with learners.

Heron (1999) writes that these three kinds of authority are often confused. Because teachers have knowledge, the traditional assumption is that they should therefore exert political authority in a directive way, making all decisions for their students as to what they should study and how they should study it. Then, because they have to direct everything, they should exercise their charismatic authority to control power, that is, to enforce rules and carry out assessments of student learning. “Thus the traditional teacher decides what students shall learn, when and how they shall learn it and whether they have learnt it” (p. 21).

**Linda Goulet:** How do these different kinds of authority translate in your professional practice?

**Warren:** Well, look at the example of tutelary authority. There are knowledge and skills that have been accumulated that can be passed on. I think of the popular education spiral model – drawn from Arnold et al. (1991), which was based on the work of Paulo Freire among others – that I use in my teaching. In this model, we acknowledge that people come to learning with experiences of something. We make that experience visible and conscious, and then add new theory and information in order to deepen the understanding of those experiences in order to develop plans for action. So authority is useful, but it always sits in tension between the passing on of information on the one hand, and the self-generated and emergent nature of personal learning on the other.

Heron (1999) feels therefore that ideally the responsibility for learning should rest with the learner with the facilitator as a guide. The challenge then is to find ways to integrate the authority of the facilitator with the autonomy of the learner. Heron proposes that the facilitator pass on some body of knowledge and skill – the content of learning – by a process of learning that affirms the autonomy and wholeness of the learner. This is a paradox, especially because learners and teachers come from a system that doesn't reconcile the dilemma of teacher authority with student autonomy.

The reluctance by learners to exercise their autonomy comes from students being socialized into authoritarian forms of authority and, “learners who emerge from it are conditioned to learn in ways that are relatively short on autonomy and holism. In a special way, they need leading into freedom and integration, when they enter another more liberated educational culture where these values are affirmed” (Heron, 1999, p. 24).

**Ali Sammel:** That's a good point because I see that in my students, too. If only one form of authoritarian leadership is modelled to us as students in school, we tend to use that form in our professional lives without often being aware of how we have been conditioned to fit into hierarchical relationships of authority. Do you have an example of this conditioning in your students?

**Warren:** I was speaking recently to a student in my class who said that he was initially resistant to the ideas of different uses of authority according to context. His background was in situations where directive leadership was exercised and he couldn't see the point of involving the group in making decisions. He said he doubted I had the authority to teach this class but, after looking up my background, was willing to try to learn these different forms of leadership. A series of workshops transformed his views and three months into the course he has become the one most willing to take risks in his learning process about facilitation. I would say he now has the confidence to exercise his own authority in different ways when facilitating.

**Ali:** What do you think happened in the workshops to transform his views?

**Warren:** Perhaps by experiencing the facilitation processes in the course. I try to be transparent in my relationship with the students by teaching through explaining and modelling the three forms of authority articulated by Heron (1999). I feel that as an experienced facilitator I have knowledge about the processes of facilitation. This gives me tutelary authority as a facilitative leader. I consciously use the term *facilitative leadership* instead of the word leadership alone. There are three modes of this kind of leadership: (a) hierarchical (where the facilitator directs the learning process); (b) cooperative (where power is shared with the group); and (c) autonomous (where the facilitator creates, as Heron says, “the conditions within which people can exercise full self-determination in their learning” [p. 17]). Each one of these is appropriate in certain contexts and with certain purposes that are used in the learning process. Heron calls these issues “dimensions” and as a facilitator, one should be able to move “from mode to mode and dimension to dimension in the light of the changing situation in the group” (p. 9).

**Linda:** Your student's initial resistance to exploring different forms of authority illustrates the importance of attention to context. To me, it is important to think about authority

not just in relationships but in relationships that occur in the broader and historical context. We are all embedded in relationships of authority in our personal lives and in our work. Policies, practices, and laws are enacted by delegated authority in our society and institutions so we do need to recognize that as teachers or others professionals, in addition to our informal authority through our knowledge and skills, we do have formal authority delegated to us in our positions as teachers or youth workers. We make decisions that affect the lives of others.

**Warren:** So how does this play out in your work?

**Linda:** My work in education is, and has been, with Indigenous peoples where the context includes the history of colonization. From an Indigenous perspective, Smith (1999) describes colonization as the process that facilitated the economic, political, and cultural expansion of European power and control by subjugating Indigenous populations. Colonization includes both the material and the ideal imposition of power with the material occurring through concrete actions (such as military conquest) and the ideal taking place through the racialization<sup>1</sup> and denigration of a people based on their culture and race, where Europeans and their civilization were seen as superior and therefore in possession of the right to exercise power over others deemed inferior due to their culture and race. Part of this process in Canada with Indigenous people was the creation of residential schools that had a history of demanding submission to authority that brought about learned irresponsibility among children in their care. The relationship between learner and teacher (and the school, parents, and community) was one in which the teacher had the power and authority. Students were only able to exercise their autonomy through resistance to the authority of the institution. So that is some of the historical context of the students I work with.

**Warren:** How does that history impact your teaching practice?

**Linda:** As a teacher striving to move forward from this colonial past to a more emancipatory teaching practice, I have to be aware of how I exercise power and authority in my classes. Whether it is conscious or not, Indigenous students are aware of past colonial relationships of schooling. As such, they do not respond well to authority figures and imposed control (L. Goulet & K. Goulet, in press). Instead, teachers need to invite Indigenous students into the learning endeavour by developing close, personal, trusting relationships with the students that respect their culture and individuality. Students will then follow the lead of the teacher and respect their use of shared authority because they then believe the teacher is using their authority in a way that respects the student. So rather than denigrating the student in the learning process as is the case in the racialized or colonial educational endeavour, the teacher uses authority to create a respectful learning environment for all students where power is used in such a way that it develops respectful relationships between the teacher and student, and among the students.

Freire (1998) helped me to see the complexity of the use of authority with marginalized populations when he wrote about the difference between “power” and “power over”. To analyze power in the teaching-learning relationship, Freire explores the contradiction of freedom and

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<sup>1</sup> Racialization is a sociological term that refers to the social process by which certain groups of people are singled out for unique treatment on the basis of real or imagined physical characteristics.

authority, of developing voice and critical reflection within limits of respect for others, and the development of discipline and democratic practice. To Freire, democratic leadership balances freedom and authority. Authority is use of power that can silence students and impose one's own views upon them. Or, power can be used to set ethical limits on the exercise of freedom. Ethical limits are established and enforced when respect is used to guide the actions of both teacher and student. Respect means that the teacher does not abuse power. She or he acts in the interest of the student in a way that maintains the right of the student to develop her or his own voice. Power is used to ensure that the voice is an ethical or respectful one that does not "falsify the truth" (Freire, 1998, p. 66), is responsible in its expression, and is not used to silence others.

**Warren:** So does Freire believe that teachers should exercise political power directly to ensure the norms of the social relationships are respectful?

**Linda:** Yes. Referring back to Heron's (1999) kinds of authority, directive leadership is used to create a group that knows how to interact effectively. Once the students have skills for working together, it enables the teacher to move from directive political use of power to collaborative or guided decision-making. Often in schooling, authority refers to the regulation of behaviour and the acquisition of knowledge. In the past, Western education has viewed knowledge as one truth coming from an external expert. More recently, theories of the social construction of knowledge have taken a more equitable view with input coming from the student. Similarly, the classroom is being seen as a learning community where supportive social relationships lead to the positive construction of knowledge that has meaning for students. In order for learning to have meaning in a context of Indigenous education, positive social relationships – between the teacher and the students and among the students – are needed to overcome past colonial practices that imposed Eurocentric thought. Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, and Teddy (2007) use the term *culturally responsive pedagogy of relations* where power is shared, culture counts, and learning is interactive.

In contrast, Dion's (2009) study of teachers integrating Indigenous content in classes with non-Indigenous students demonstrated how some teachers are reluctant to share authority with their students. Teachers tended to present Aboriginal content as factual, personal stories of characters with whom students could empathize, but failed to engage students in a discussion of broader, systemic issues. Dion theorized that it was the teachers' "systems of reasoning" (p. 80) that constrained their teaching approach. Even though students appeared ready for "disruptive" discussions, teachers led students away from controversy, bound by their beliefs and pedagogy of mastery and control where dealing with systemic issues may lead to controversy, the disruption of Euro-Canadian beliefs about history and identity, and negative feelings on the part of their Euro-Canadian students. Teachers also feared that this kind of controversy might lead to a backlash from parents and administrators, so used their authority to keep the discussion within the realms of their own comfort zones.

Dion's account illustrates the need for teachers to be able to take risks if they are to create shared authority in the classroom. Risk requires trust in teacher-student relationships: trust in oneself and in the students. Such is the case when teachers adopt the talking circle as a method of sharing knowledge construction in the classroom. In the talking circle, each in the circle has the opportunity to contribute ideas and opinions in a manner respectful of others. The teacher retains

her authority to ensure the sharing is respectful while creating space for students to practice their authority.

**Ali:** This sounds wonderful. So the talking circle is a method that illustrates Freire's contradiction of developing student autonomy and teacher authority. Can you give an example of how this is put into action?

**Linda:** I observed a student teacher using a talking circle with a Grade 5 class for the first time. She described the expectations at the beginning: that the circle is a place of respect, there are no right or wrong answers, that each person is to take a turn speaking or pass if they choose to do so, that whoever has the stone is the only one speaking, that those who don't have the stone listen respectfully, and that there are no put-downs in the circle. As the stone was passed, some students were shy and reluctant to talk in front of others when they were the centre of attention. While waiting for a student to gather his thoughts, some students began to talk to each other so the teacher used her authority to remind students to be patient while others thought about what they wanted to say. As others shared, some students giggled. Again the teacher interrupted the flow of the circle to remind students to be respectful and not to laugh at the sharing of others.

In this example, we see students being given the opportunity to develop their voices and their independent thoughts as the teacher creates the social space that is safe. The circle equalizes the power in the classroom by creating a space where students have the opportunity to say what they think. The teacher ensures that students are given the time needed to think before they speak, and censures the inappropriate behaviour of other students. The teacher enacts the contradiction of autonomy and authority. She uses her authority to create the social conditions and social relationships in which students can learn and practice how to think independently and have the freedom of self-expression that is respectful and does not take away the freedom of others. I think the talking circle is an effective form of shared leadership that can be used across contexts in adult-youth interactions.

Ali, how do your theoretical and practical experiences coincide with this teacher's practice?

**Ali:** Like the teacher in your example, Linda, I seek to work with my students to explore how pedagogic power, enacted through teacher authority, can be reimagined. I teach in the formal education system, at a large university and I work across three campuses teaching science to students of all ages who are studying to be school teachers.

**Linda:** So your experiences working with relational authority are similar to the situation Bingham (2008) explores?

**Ali:** Yes, the context is the same because I am assigned to lecture in a university setting. However, Bingham explores authority within the teacher-student relationship of question and answer while I have been trying what I believe to be a more emancipatory approach that is called the *flipped classroom* in my lectures. This is where you use a two-hour lecture time slot to do hands-on science activities that are feasible for 200 students in a large lecture room. By completing the activities together, we co-construct our explanations of science concepts. It is this mutually agreed upon explanation that is written on the board that becomes the initial

understanding of the science concept. By conducting individual or group activities and discussing findings, I am seeing how sharing the co-development of knowledge can be disruptive to traditional notions of knowledge authority (i.e., the idea that only the teacher has the knowledge and is able to provide it). Traditionally the authority of the teacher is assumed to be recognized by reasonable students, who also assume the speaker has engaged in scholarship with the academic community from which this knowledge has been generated. I believe a key aspect in this scenario is that the receivers of knowledge have to gain the exact understanding of the knower to receive the prestige of having gained the authority to themselves become speakers. So the content of what is said by the speaker becomes a critical aspect of teaching and learning. Traditionally, the process of engagement by the student with the content or the speaker is not seen to be as important.

If, as Bingham (2008) suggests, the relationship between the speaker and the listener in the process of learning is viewed as importantly as the content itself, then we need to rethink how we understand knowledge and authority. My use of the flipped classroom within my formal university lectures in science education has encouraged me to revisit my own beliefs and assumptions of knowledge generation and authority. If my pedagogic practice is built upon the belief that each student brings to lectures his or her own life stories and knowledge base, then dialogical communication must be an essential element to generating understanding. As such, misunderstanding a concept or question is as important as understanding it. Interpreting what the speaker has said in a way that is different than what was intended can allow for a deeper level of communication to occur, one that can produce clearer meaning and a new, collectively generated knowledge outcome.

**Linda:** So your beliefs about all participants coming to the group with life stories is similar to Warren's belief about all having experiences to build upon. How does this professional belief lead to unfolding a deeper level of knowledge?

**Ali:** I believe the key point here is the relationship between speakers and listeners, for it is within the process of communication that personal and scientific knowledge is analysed and deconstructed for both parties, and traditional notions of who has the knowledge and authority may be challenged. By speaking and listening, all individuals can construct a new knowledge base for themselves, if applicable, and can be part of the process of collective knowledge generation. In my flipped classroom, instead of me being the authority on the topic of photosynthesis, for example, I employ demonstrations or individual or group activities to elicit conversations. Students explain and discuss what they have witnessed and collectively we generate points representing what was witnessed to occur. These points then form the basis of the theory that is generated for the concept. In this way, I do not come in and explain the concept of photosynthesis, but create situations in which students generate and explore their own understandings and theories through a variety of activities and conversations. I strive not to lead conversations toward a specific end point, but rather let the key points naturally develop and allow for other points to be present or absent, as per class conversations.

All mutually agreed upon ideas are recorded and all will be up for scrutiny via further exploration conducted after the flipped classroom lecture. During these conversations my role tends to be that of a facilitator of questions, clarifier of points, and note taker. Much of what I



would have previously indicated as key points around the concept of photosynthesis is generated by the group, but new unanticipated ideas offering insight into student thought processes are also recorded. This process hinges on the idea that all communally made points are equally worthy of confirmation through further exploration rather than all points are equally scientifically valid. Therefore, how authority is understood within the lecture space shifts slightly, and rather than viewing me as having it and the students as not having it, authority becomes understood as communal in relation to knowledge exploration and generation.

**Warren:** Does that mean that in this flipped classroom style of lecture, you have less authority?

**Ali:** I don't think it's a question of less or more, I think I am using my authority differently. What I have found is that I have not abdicated my infrastructural position of authority, for I have structured the activities so that many of the roads do indeed lead to Rome. And with the clarification questions I seek, I understand that I am having some input into shaping the knowledge outcomes. An example of this would be, if a student's interpretation is not in line with current scientific understanding, I ask further questions exploring the student's meaning and initiate a conversation leading to an analysis of that line of thought, and/or the introduction of a contradictory piece of information. Through this process, I learn more about how my students comprehend and construct knowledge and how they communicate and summarize their understandings and misunderstandings. By engaging with the students in this way, I develop a deeper understanding of their interpretations and misinterpretations of what they observed in the activities. This allows me to gain new insights and knowledge that become part of the conversation. More importantly, what has become evident is that by generating knowledge collectively, assumptions of who has authority to speak and who can only listen are being disrupted. This process provides alternative ways for students to understand their identities and roles as students and allows them to conceive of an unorthodox science pedagogy, one in which their own future students can have the authority to develop knowledge.

**Linda:** So the flipped classroom approach also creates a space for students to develop their autonomy. But as they exercise their autonomy in a discipline where there is usually thought to be one right answer, with this collective knowledge construction, how do the students know if what is generated together is scientifically valid or not?

**Ali:** As a large class we develop our rudimentary theories around science concepts. However, you are right, our theories might not be exactly the same as current science theory. So to clarify which is which, we do two things. First we deconstruct the scientific endeavour of knowledge generation, which leads to the understanding that science is a never-ending process, where information is always in a state of flux and being revised. Unwavering universal truths do not have a place in scientific ways of working. Science can be likened to an exploration process where all ideas must be justified and stand the test of community questioning. This allows students to understand they have been involved in the process of generating scientific knowledge for themselves and, as happens with other scientists, some ideas are currently supported by the larger community and some are not. Reflection on the process and justification of ideas is a regular occurrence, both in the scientific community and in the online discussion time after our

lecture. Students are asked to read articles and listen to podcasts and join online discussions to clarify, justify, and validate the conceptual points generated collectively in the lecture.

**Linda:** It's interesting how this approach reveals to the students the process of knowledge creation in the broader context.

**Ali:** When students are given an activity and asked to record what they observe and are able to combine it with their life experiences to generate theories, a shift happens: The students start to perceive themselves as knowledge generators. They come to understand a different style of learning and themselves as having the experience base to become an authority.

So like the talking circle described in your example, Linda, I believe this flipped classroom approach allows me to model a similar teaching and learning style. In both approaches, the teacher uses his or her authority to create relationships and social conditions that allow students to have the freedom to think independently. In this way, much of the joy and responsibility of constructing knowledge sits with the student. What is your opinion and practice around this, Warren?

**Warren:** I like Stacey and Griffin's (2005) point, drawn from complexity theory, that we can't change people or the pattern of their interactions, but we can change the conditions in which people interact. So I apply this in my teaching by creating spaces for students as facilitators to experience many different ways to explore the role of authority in leading groups.

For example, every year for the past eight years I have taught a course called Leadership in Small Groups, where undergraduate students in a human relations program are given the opportunity to explore their own facilitation skills and styles. One of the key assignments I give them is to lead a workshop that will enable the rest of the class to learn about a particular element of facilitation. Students learn effective ways to observe and interpret the significance of group behaviour for the purpose of intervening effectively. The first step to doing this is for them to become aware of how they view themselves as facilitators.

Because the course is on facilitative leadership, I had asked the students in the first week of class to write a sentence that begins with, "I lead ...". They did not put their names on the papers. I then collected them, shuffled them, and distributed them randomly at the end of the class where students each then read aloud their classmates' sentences.

The sentence "I lead" is sufficiently ambiguous that it results in some surprising and personal statements. For example, one student wrote, "I lead because I know where I want to go and try not to let anyone get in my way". Another wrote, "I believe a good leader doesn't point himself out, but has a quiet, noticeable presence and that's how I try to lead". A third shared, "My sister is 15 years old and [ever] since I can remember, she has looked at me as if I was her role model. Therefore, I try to give her a good example so that she can become a great adult". Then the teaching team (the teaching assistant and the professor) took the papers, grouped them into four categories of statements about leadership, and brought them back to the class, posting them in different areas of the classroom. One of the group of statements included sentences we identified but did not name as encompassing, controlling, or directive leadership (where the facilitator has and exercises power). Another represented charismatic leadership (where one's

inner resources and presence enables a sharing of authority). The third included examples of situational leadership (where authority is determined by the reading of the context and matching facilitator authority with what is needed at the time), and the last encompassed examples of collaborative leadership (which involves sharing authority as an underlying value). Each student then looked at all four lists and chose the one that best fit their own preferred leading style.

**Linda:** So what choices did the students make?

**Warren:** No one chose the directive style. One supposition we made from this was that our classroom and departmental culture is founded on the helping profession where to be directive or controlling is seen as a negative. This was also my experience in previous classes. Students invariably had a negative view of directive as being authoritarian and were often caught in the binary between authoritarian (“all determination of policy by the leader”) and laissez-faire (“complete freedom for group or individual decision, without any leader participation”) styles of leadership (Lewin, Lippit, & White, 1970, p. 202). One goal of the class is to help them see another view where the two styles are equally useful at different times in the life of a group, as in the examples we have shared of the talking circle and the flipped classroom.

I operate on the assumption that my students who often work with youth come into the course with experiences in groups that don’t function very well. So I asked them to portray these experiences by using their bodies to illustrate a dysfunctional group through a still tableau or bodies frozen in time, a technique developed by theatre practitioner Augusto Boal (1979) as part of his Theatre of the Oppressed.

After choosing their groups, students then gave a title to the style from reviewing the group of statements, prepared a tableau of a dysfunctional group, and tried to change the tableau to make the group function better. Following this, they discussed the role of group facilitation in making the group functional and the type of facilitator that would be needed in each case. The following are some observations by a teaching assistant of two groups of students who portrayed two forms of facilitator authority<sup>2</sup> and how it may be used with groups:

*Situational Leadership (“I lead when I feel the need to for certain situations”)*

The group summarizes these qualities by calling this leadership “according to what the situation calls for.” They add that this happens, “when no one else steps forward, when I am asked to lead, when I feel like I have some experience and expertise.” This tableau they show portrays a group as sitting in a semicircle, some look away, one talks on her cell phone, a member is sprawled, legs outstretched, a hat pulled over her face, while another stands with an angry expression on her face. The facilitator of the class taps the shoulder of each individual in the tableau in turn and asks the character to speak from inside their characters. “I don’t want to be here,” says one. Another states, “I’m so over the top.” Yet another declares, “I’m pissed at you.”

The facilitator asks the students who are watching this tableau, “What is going on?”

“No one is paying attention, people are doing their own thing,” responds the class.

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<sup>2</sup> The whole workshop, including two other leadership styles, is described and analyzed in Linds & Ebbesen (in press).

Observing the woman standing, the class points out that “one member is reacting,” and they see a potential leader in this because “there is nothing positive, but the expression of anger is at least something.” Warren, the instructor, asks, “Why is she mad?” Someone reasons that it is because everyone is withdrawn, that there is a sense of rejection, particularly from the woman with the hat. The facilitator asks those looking at the tableau to try and change it so that it becomes a more functional group. The class wants her to “lose the hat,” describing it as a “blocker.”

When her face is exposed, the class comments she looks like she is crying. A student places someone’s hands on her shoulders in a gesture of “empathy and concern.” They suggest that the person holding the phone hang up, and they move another member into the middle of the group “so she gets everyone’s attention, in order to create community.” (Observer Notes, September 2011)

**Warren:** Interestingly, the facilitator’s actions appear to represent a response to the group’s need for cohesion. In this case, through the leader’s actions, the group was able to focus on the task at hand, thus creating community. This is situational leadership, where “effective leadership is contingent upon matching styles with situations” (Rothwell, 2001, p. 141). The notes continue:

*Collaborative leadership (“I lead most often by example and collaboration with my colleagues”)*

The group standing beside this list identified the leadership style as *leading by example*. Reasons for choosing this were “it is very important to consider people’s feelings; to include everyone; to lead from the heart.”

The group sits facing in all directions; the image is crowded with individuals in pairs locked in distinct story lines: one member crouches in front of another, others appear to be arguing, and a woman weeps. “Different power relationships, too many people trying to lead at the same time, multiple hierarchies, all of them are isolated,” the class calls out. The voices from the image group recount, “I feel inferior,” “I don’t want to talk to anyone,” and “I don’t agree; get involved.”

The class decides that some of the group should stand facing in, “inviting them to be part of the group.” They take a woman’s hands off her hips, and turn another, saying, “this member needs to see the group.” The changed image has everyone circled around the woman who is weeping. The facilitator asks, “What is the main thing that has to happen here to get to a functioning group?” “Someone needed to initiate,” the class answers. (In other words, in order to lead by example someone needs to initiate.)

What types of facilitation skills were needed to change this? Students respond, “Active listening; being present for the group; supportive environment.” (Observation Notes, September 2011)

As we see in these two examples the creation of conditions to work collaboratively as a facilitative leader is linked to the purposes and contexts of the groups that are being worked with. They have illustrated collaborative leadership as being concurrent (involving more than one leader), collective (working together for a common purpose), mutual (all are able to speak for the group), and compassionate (preserving the dignity of all) (Raelin, 2006). These aspects of collaborative leadership connect to the oral history idea of *shared authority* which Michael

Frisch (1990) articulates as “what should not only be the distribution of knowledge from those who have it to those who do not, but a more profound *sharing* [emphasis added] of knowledges” (p. xxii). This idea of *sharing knowledges* links to a notion of authority being nurtured and developed in relationships.

**Linda:** As authority is developed in relationships, one needs to be aware of the power dynamics in the relationships, not just within the micro-context of past student experiences, but also within the history of how institutional power was exercised in previous relationships because that history impacts how youth or students interpret how we exercise our power in the present. Similar to Arnold et al.’s (1991) popular education theory that new learning will be layered upon past experience, cultural psychology considers the impact of culture and broader social relationships on learning. For example, Cole and Engestrom (1993) argue that all learners and teachers, no matter their age, bring their personal and cultural histories to learning. For example, work with Indigenous peoples needs to recognize the past and ongoing colonial relationship between Indigenous peoples and settler Canadians, as well as the authoritarian stance of institutions in the past.

In my work, I prefer to use the term shared or distributed authority, where the teacher recognizes students’ history and uses her authority to structure the learning so that students bring their knowledge and thus their authority to the learning. Rather than being a one-way process of the learner gaining access to external expertise, the teacher structures the learning into an interactive, iterative process of the teacher setting the parameters for learning, the students contributing their knowledge which the teacher then responds to, followed by a further response from the students. Learning becomes an iterative process that connects the internal knowledge of the student with the shared knowledge of the class that includes the teacher’s pedagogical knowledge and knowledge that comes from sources external to the classroom.

**Ali:** That sounds very circular, like the teacher gives over authority for a time, then the students have authority for a time, and back and forth. Can you give us an example to clarify how that happens in a learning situation?

**Linda:** Sure. Earlier, Warren referred to the teacher being responsible for content while the authority is shared with students in the process of learning. In the following example, the authority for both the content and process of learning are shared. In the last class I taught to my teacher education students who were all Indigenous students of the Denesuline Nation, I used pedagogical knowledge (photovoice<sup>3</sup>) that I had learned at a conference from a Pueblo educator. The curriculum goal I had was for students to learn how to use the cultural values of the community as the foundation for the classroom social interactions in their practice teaching situation. The pedagogical form of photovoice drew out of students their knowledge of community values to organize and interpret that knowledge by taking and choosing photographs that represented those values. The community values were knowledge that I, as teacher and outsider to the community, did not have. By becoming part of the curriculum of the class, the

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<sup>3</sup> Photovoice was developed by Caroline C. Wang and Mary Ann Burris in 1992. Participants are asked to represent their community or point of view by taking photographs, discussing them together, and developing narratives to go with their photos. It is often used among marginalized people, and is intended to give insight into how they conceptualize their circumstances. A fuller explanation is available in Wang and Burris (1994).

value of the students' knowledge was acknowledged as the students expressed their authority in the classroom in relation to the curriculum.

As the teacher, I set the structure of the experience. In “doing” the experience of taking, choosing, and discussing the photographs, students set the content. As teacher, I did not know what this content would be and did not have the authority to dispute it since the content drew on the expertise of the students, not on my expertise. My role was to set the task and draw out of students the meaning the photos had for them. In this way, authority was enacted in different forms by the students and by me as the teacher, in both our relationship with one another, among the students in the class, and in our relationship to the curriculum of the course. Thinking about shared responsibility for content and process gives value to community knowledge, an aspect often ignored when working with students, especially in situations where the youth are from marginalized populations.

**Warren:** So as professionals, authority is a complicated business – one that we have to reflect on in our practice to help us think about how we use our authority to draw on and develop the autonomy and the authority of those with whom we work. What do you think Ali?

**Ali:** Like Linda, reflection on my teaching practices aims to make sense of how teachers can have both wariness towards their authority and a desire to use authority to promote student engagement and learning. In moving away from traditional understanding of authority and pedagogic practices, I actively sought to provide students with the space to explore, analyze, critique, and communicate their experiences, thoughts, and ideas in a safe and supportive environment. However, I initially believed safe and supportive to mean I needed to be more passive as a teacher. I quickly came to appreciate that being a passive teacher was not effective for student learning. An effective teacher cannot abdicate her authority, but needs to embrace it to challenge those same experiences, thoughts and ideas that her students hold. To challenge students, even through gentle approaches, means that a teacher needs to directly rely on and implement their pedagogic power. To confront students and have it legitimated, the teacher needs to act from an authority position, for this position provides the jurisdiction to do so.

**Warren:** Have you found that confrontation, even when gentle, impacts on the safe space you wish to create?

**Ali:** Yes, absolutely. When I ask students to problematize raised points, the safe space to offer ideas and thoughts becomes slightly less safe for those students not comfortable with this kind of investigation. As such, I found some students choose to become excluded from the collaborative development of knowledge. When other students do engage, insightful conversations emerge creating a banter that offers a variety of perceptions and spaces for re-engagement. Interestingly, I have discovered other reasons why students do not engage when the authority of knowledge construction is shared. I have found some students expect the teacher to have and use their authority in traditional ways. They may distrust and disrespect the teacher, and/or question her credibility if this authority is not traditionally implemented.

Warren, you said you explained and modelled different forms of leadership that explore authority in different contexts. Similarly, in my situation, in order to help students understand what I am doing when I create shared learning spaces, I have found it important to explain the

pedagogic thought processes and the research supporting this form of shared authority. Discussions of what good teaching and learning theories and practices have looked like traditionally, and how practices can be shaped to enhance contemporary learning helps students to explore their own expectations and assumptions.

Specifically, discussions of what student's ideals, roles, and practices have been within learning spaces, and how these are linked to historical assumptions of what the "good student" should do or be, have helped me set the scene for my interactive lecture processes. I have found that student's perceptions are always contextually bound to their past experiences. Who they understand themselves to be and what they are prepared to give in a collective learning space is very much determined by how they engaged with and were treated in past educational experiences.

**Linda:** So you have also found the context and the students' history or past experiences impact their response to authority?

**Ali:** Yes. The students' past experiences are reflective of bigger educational pictures from the era in which they were educated. Educational approaches are influenced by cultural opinion, beliefs, and traditions about what good education should encompass. I work with students to see how they have been acculturated to understand certain things about who they can and should be in a teaching space. We analyze traditional cultural expectations of what a teacher is supposed to do and be, and this has helped to deconstruct past expectations of teacher and student, and has offered the students spaces to imagine who they would like to be, as a student now, and as a teacher in the future. When offered another way of *being students*, the majority do take the initiative of trying something interactive and new.

In this way, I have been trying to overcome a dualism that can develop when exploring relational authority. I have found the opposite of teacher authority in my practice is not teacher passivity, but a deconstruction of expectations of how the learning and teaching space have historically been viewed and how these assumptions impact today's learning spaces. As such, alongside interactive processes to co-developing content knowledge, I work with my students to discuss good pedagogical practices that both promote active, long-lasting learning and encourage critical and creative thinking. Comparing traditional forms of rote learning, which rarely leads to deep understanding and developing knowledge collectively, has allowed my students to appreciate my use of pedagogic power and authority. They recognize I will not provide content to learn by rote in my lectures but will create situations where learning can support self-directed thinkers.

**Linda:** Supporting self-directed thinking on the part of the learner or the youth sounds like emancipatory practice to me. It looks like there are different aspects to consider but also different approaches to developing shared authority in relationships.

## Dancing Beyond the Dance

*How can we know the dancer from the dance?*  
(Yeats, 2002, p. 105)

As you have read, each of us is using different forms of shared authority which are dynamic and ever-evolving according to the relationships of the dancers, the dance, and the dance space. But the dance continues as a daily practice for each of us. So how do we conclude something that really has no conclusion? The only thing that we can do here is to reflect upon and summarize the key lessons from our practices at this point, but we are excited that this learning journey will continue individually, together with each other and with the reader.

**Linda:** As professionals we have authority, both in terms of recognized expertise and institutional power. Historically, in our institutions, authority has been directive and not attentive to the history, context, and knowledge of those with whom we work – who are the experts in their own lives. For me, reflecting on and changing how I use authority with others has helped my practice to become more effective because shared authority expands the resources available to all participants for moving into the future through problem solving or learning as the expertise and authority of the other is identified and utilized. At the same time, it is up to me, as the professional, to bring to my practice the ways in which authority can be shared appropriately in my context and the context of those with whom I work.

**Ali:** For me, I have found that student empowerment or the creation of learning spaces where knowledge production is shared does not require the relinquishment of teacher or adult authority. I now believe that understanding and managing the constraints and parameters within lectures that influence student and teacher relations and engagement in the co-creation of knowledge is a key point in generating relational authority. How students expect a teacher to behave, how they make sense of what a lecture or learning space should look like, and how they understand their own identities and behaviours within that space will impact on their engagement with sharing authority. It is important to explore these ideas with your students and deconstruct their responses as you create these shared learning spaces. Further, students need to be reminded of what you are doing in these spaces, why you are using the pedagogy you employ, and what the research shows about learning outcomes via this shared approach (versus the traditional lecture-based learning style, for example).

I have found that when students understand why you are using the methods you are, they tend to understand what you are trying to do. Some will still struggle with this new approach, as they have been trained in and by a different teaching style and it has worked well for them, but others will not only embrace this practice but flourish with their learning. In the end, I have found that the majority of students grant you the respect and professional authority that comes from realizing that a teacher does not have to be the traditional authority figure to be a good teacher. What a good teacher does is employ good teaching practices for the enhancement of student learning.



**Warren:** Kevin Kumashiro (2001) writes:

Anti-oppressive education works against commonsense views of what it means to teach. Teachers must move beyond their preconceived notions of what it means to teach, and students must move beyond their current conceptions of what it means to learn.... [It] involves constantly re-examining and troubling the forms of repetition that play out in one's practices and that hinder attempts to challenge oppressions, desiring and working through crisis rather than avoiding and masking it ...[and] imagining new possibilities for who we are and can be. (p. 9)

New possibilities involve imagining and enacting different forms of authority through spaces of what Mason (1998) calls “safe uncertainty”. He writes, “this position is not fixed. It is one which is always in a state of flow, and is consistent with the notion of a respectful, collaborative, evolving narrative, one which allows a context to emerge whereby new explanations can be placed alongside rather than instead of, in competition with” (p. 194) the explanations the teachers, students, adults, and youth bring to their work together. Safe uncertainty is not a technique but rather a perspective that is constantly evolving as the group develops. The facilitator enables the group to deal with the complexities of situations. The political power of the facilitator shifts in response to what is happening – from directive to collaborative to autonomous forms of leadership according to the context of learning. Guiding students into the emergent space that is necessitated by this process of relational and contextual authority is emancipatory practice.

### **As the Music Fades...**

In most adult-youth relationships, adults have the most power, either by influence or directly from their positions within institutions. Our society is organized so that power is exercised through hierarchical relationships. As professionals moving toward emancipatory practice, we need to reflect on our use of our power and authority as well as how the youth with whom we work are exercising their power. Youth do exercise their power as best they can, and, as in Bingham's (2008) example of students choosing to leave the classroom of a teacher they don't like, sometimes the exercise of that authority is expressed as resistance to excessive authority and imbalance of power, which is most often not beneficial to the youth.

Exercising our authority in different ways opens spaces for youth to exercise their power in different ways. Like Heron (1999), we believe there are different kinds of leadership that are appropriate in different situations with a wide variety of ways to exercise authority. As professionals, there are times when we need to use our authority directly. Other situations call for students or youth to exercise their power directly. In between these two extremes lies a wide range of ways to share authority where power is more dispersed.

As the stories in this article have illustrated, the teacher has the authority to create spaces where power sharing in relationships can be more dynamic, in a flow between the teacher and the student, among the students, and with the content and processes used by the teacher or chosen by the students. As professionals, we judge when and how to disperse authority depending on the situation. Therefore, although we agree that authority is expressed in

relationships, we find the term situational authority more useful to reflect the view of the teacher or youth worker. That is not to discount the authority of the youth in our relationships. But as the adult in the relationship, it is up to us to educate, model, and create space for youth to express their authority in ways that meet both their goals and ours.

Through reflection on our praxis, and in dialogue with each other, our insights have allowed us to move forward in our journey understanding authority. We hope that you, as a reader, can use our experiences and apply the points raised to your youth-adult interactions. We invite you to continue this dialogue with us.

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